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ABSTRACT

The novel, "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" attempts to reconcile the dichotomy that exists between art and technology. The main character, Pirsig, believes that technology, or the making of things, is essentially art for two reasons: the Greeks never separated art from manufacture and real technology does not exploit nature. Rather, technology involves a fusion of nature and the human spirit resulting in a new transcending creation. This concept is similar to that at the heart of Zen meditation and art. Pirsig believes that the conflict between art and technology can be resolved if technical workers show care about the work they are doing, if peace of mind persists in the recognition of numerous ways of doing things, and if one achieves complete identification with one's circumstances in the pursuit of "quality." In this quality, Pirsig sees a spirtual force, similar to Buddha, the "arete" of the Greeks, or the ultimate expressions of other religions. Therefore, the pursuit of quality is the link that binds art and technology together. (MAI)

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THE BUDDHA IN THE DIGITAL COMPUTER: ART AND TECHNOLOGY IN ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE

Edwin W. Williams

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is a book about unity, but in it there are a great number of dichotomies: form vs. substance classic understanding vs. romantic understanding, primary America vs. secondary America, the narrator vs. Phaedrus, Chris vs. his father, the Sutherland's attitude toward motorcycle maintenance vs. the narrator's, art vs. technology. In the series of chautauquas that occur throughout the book, Pirsig attempts to show how these dichotomies can be resolved and unity achieved. This paper will consider one of them, art vs. technology.

C. P. Snow in his book The Two Cultures accurately described the problem that exists between the two, and Pirsig's book is a plan for bridging this gap. Lord Snow's solution was that we should learn more about the other's culture; the humanist should know the second law of thermodynamics, and the scientist should know Shakespeare. The problem with this solution, however, is that you are still left with two cultures. It's true, at cocktail parties the scientist and the humanist might talk with more understanding, but the next day they go to their separate studies. Pirsig's solution, on the other hand, is much more radical because he sees that there would be no gap at all if we can adjust our vision, but we shall have more to say about this later.

John and Sylvia Sutherland, his friends and companions on the

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trip, represent the common stance of man against technology with their flight from and hatred of technology. John's refusal to repair his motorcycle and Sylvia's suppressed anger at a dripping faucet are their attempts to escape from something they feel can destroy them by turning them into mass people serving ugly shapes of brick and metal that foul the air and take away their freedom. They don't call it technology, but instead they talk about "it" or "it all" as in, "There is just no escape from it." When asked what "it" is, the answer is also general, "the whole thing," or "the whole organized bit," or even "the system." "It," Pirsig realizes, is technology or "the force that gives rise to technology, something undefined, but inhuman, mechanical, lifeless, a blind monster, a death force." (p. 16)

John Wain, the modern British poet, has described the products of technology in this way:

> On the surface they flatter our intelligence,
> They are all smiles, they bend to our tasks:
> Then suddenly they turn and savage us.

They savage man's body but also man's mind and spirit. Wain urges us to consider what these man-hating machines do to us:

> "Men like Gods!" cried eager-beaver Wells:
> He knew his own mistake before he died.
> He should have postulated men like rods,
> Like girders, ratchets, valves and coils of wire.

The narrator recognizes the validity of this attitude. He should because it was just such a death machine that killed Phaedrus, his former personality. "He was dead. Destroyed by order of the court,

enforced by the transmission of high-voltage alternating current through the lobes of his brain. Approximately 800 mills of amperage at durations of 0.5 to 1.5 seconds had been applied on twenty-eight consecutive occasions, in a process known technologically as 'Annihilation ECS" (p. 84). He complains that radio and TV have replaced the old style chautauqua. He sees that America is cut off and isolated because of the freeways, jet flights, TV, and movie spectaculars because they convince us that what is right around us is unimportant. He recognizes that there is much ugliness in modern technology which starts with plastic childhood toys and continues through junky consumer products overlaid with a veneer of "style" to make it acceptable. The result is a depressing dullness of appearance, which is also phony.

The Sutherland's attitude toward technology is widespread, but Pirsig points out that this fearful and hateful posture is self-defeating. He says: "The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha -- which is to demean oneself" (p. 18).

Pirsig notes that a root word of technology, techne, originally meant art since technology is simply the making of things, and the Greeks never separated art from manufacture in their minds. There is ugliness in technology he acknowledges, but this is a result of a lack of Quality in the making of it, just as in art. The ugliness lies not in the materials of technology, nor in the objects made from the materials; neither is the ugliness in the people who produce it or those who use it. It is in the relationship between the

subject who produces it and the object which he produces. This results in a similar relationship between those who use the objects of technology and the things they use. Pirsig's solution to resolving this conflict is "to break down the barriers of dualistic thought that prevent a real understanding of what technology is -- not an exploitation of nature, but a fusion of nature and the human spirit into a new kind of creation that transcends both" (p. 284).

This fusion of nature and the human spirit is at the heart of Zen meditation and art, but it is also the heart of motorcycle maintenance and technology. The difficulty lies in the fact that too often they are split. One part of this fusion Pirsig states very simply as caring about what you are doing. Early in the novel he describes what happened to his motorcycle when some young, uncaring mechanics performed a wretched and unnecessary overhaul. He observed several signs of their lack of caring: the blaring of the radio, their speed, and their expressions which revealed a spectator attitude, a lack of identification with their job. The difference between good mechanics and bad mechanics is in their capacity to care for what they are doing. He introduces us to the mechanic who cares when he stops in Grants Pass, California to have his chain guard repaired. The welder's shop is clean and tidy with all the tools hung up with care. The welder doesn't rush and doesn't talk, but he uses the torch and filler rod on the thin sheet metal with such delicacy that when he is finished one can hardly see the weld. All that the narrator can say is, "It's beautiful." There are other examples in the book of those who care about what they are doing.

Another important facet of the fusion of nature and the human spirit is the concept of peace of mind. According to his custom in

in the book Pirsig does not explain the concept in a philosophic or religious way, at least not initially, but instead he explains it by using a product of technology, the rotisserie of his Montana friends, the DeWeeses. The conversation on the proper way to assemble a rotisserie involves the narrator, who is an editor of digital computer manuals, and his friends, a musician, a painter, and a sculptor. His artistic friends do not realize he is quite serious when he explains that assembling a rotisserie is a form of art and should not be disparaged simply because it is a part of technology. He says: "This divorce of art from technology is completely unnatural. It's just that it's gone on so long you have to be an archeologist to find out where the two separated. Rotisserie assembly is actually a long-lost branch of sculpture, so divorced from its roots by centuries of intellectual wrong turns that just to associate the two sounds ludicrous" (p. 161).

The divorce is caused by a separation of reason and feeling, the classic-romantic split. The technologist proceeds by reason and gives one set of instructions for assembly, which often frustrates the nontechnologist who is trying to use these instructions. It is him against the machine. However, when one approachs it with true peace of mind, he realizes there are an infinite number of ways to assemble the machine. Then his relationship to the machine changes. Instead of following a set of instructions, the nature of the material at hand determines his thoughts and actions. It is a creative act as the materials and his thoughts change together until the material is right and his mind is at rest.

It is not hard to recognize this inner peace of mind in an artist in the creation of his painting or a monk in meditation, but

Pirsig maintains that you can see it equally in a mechanic tuning his motorcycle or in a machinist taking off that last ten-thousandth of an inch. It is a complete identification with one's circumstances in the pursuit of Quality.

Quality is a spiritual reality that has been lost in much of western thought. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in our view of science and technology. Henry Adams saw this divorce of spirituality and technology at the Great Exposition of 1900. He was troubled by the loss of unity that the force of the Virgin gave to Europe in the thirteenth century, which he failed to see in the multiplicity resulting from the force of the dynamo. Pirsig sees this spiritual force in his use of the word Quality. At times he calls Quality the Buddha, the Tao of Lao Tzu, the dharma of the Hindus, or the arete of the Greeks. The absence of Quality produces poor art or poor technology, but the pursuit of Quality in either is the link that binds them together.

This attempt at reconciliation of art and technology is perhaps the reason for the great success of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance among college students of the 1970's. They have become dissatisfied with the tools, instruments, and gadgets of their parents, but they are not wholly ready to join the romantic revolution against all these material goods they have grown to depend on. Pirsig is appealing because he affirms the Buddha on the mountain top, but he also affirms the Buddha in the digital computer.